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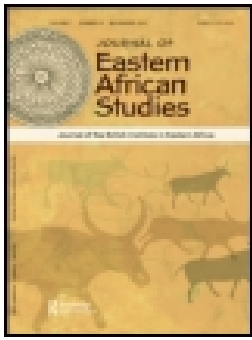
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Agency in constrained circumstances: adolescent migrant sex workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade an increasing number of adolescent girls in Ethiopia have moved from villages and rural towns to Addis Ababa to improve their own lives and those of their families. While girls' migration is in a way a 'normality', with historically girls migrating for domestic work, the dominant discourse in Ethiopia describes the migration of girls mainly in terms of trafficking and exploitation, in particular when they are doing sex work. As a result, adolescent migrant girls are reduced to passive victims. In this paper we analyse the agency of adolescent migrant sex workers in three 'phases' of their migration process, namely in the decision to migrate, in their lives in the city, and in their future aspirations. We argue that the decisions of adolescent girls to migrate to Addis Ababa is a way of asserting their agency in moving forward with life, yet this agency is taking place in highly constrained circumstances which are strongly related to the gendered ideologies that affect their position in the household, their educational opportunities and their labour market perspectives. The paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in Ethiopia in 2014.

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Migration is a hot topic in Ethiopia, as in many other countries in Africa. Television series involve migration stories, billboards show Western Union advertisements, radio programmes warn against the risks of migration and the dangers of trafficking. Yet, according to the UN, only 1% of the Ethiopian population lived abroad in 2015.¹ The number of Ethiopians that migrates internally is much bigger. While internal migration flows in Ethiopia used to be mainly rural-rural, with people migrating in search of more fertile lands, rural-urban migration has increased in the past two decades.² Reliable statistics are lacking,³ but Schewel and Fransen estimate that approximately 6% of the Ethiopian population of 15 years and older has migrated across regions in the period 2013–2018.⁴

An increasing number of adolescent girls and young women is leaving their places of origin, both internally and internationally.⁵ According to Kuschminder and Siegel,⁶ 60% of the current migrants from Ethiopia that cross borders is female, with most of them migrating to the Middle East to take up paid work as domestics.⁷ Legally it is

only possible to migrate abroad when one is over 18 years of age but birth certificates are easy to change. However, the large majority of adolescent girls migrates internally, leaving their villages in search of a better future in bigger towns, and in particular in Addis Ababa. The migration of girls is to some extent a 'normality' in Ethiopia, with historically girls migrating to provide for their families. The number of adolescent girls that is migrating independently has increased in the past decade, and is nowadays mainly framed in terms of trafficking and exploitation.⁸ Brokers would push girls to leave their places of origin and migrate to the Middle East or force them to take up commercial sex work in urban centres. In August 2019 the Ethiopian Parliament passed a law that forbids street prostitution in Addis Ababa, which can be seen as an attempt to improve the image of the capital. The large number of sex workers in the city, many of whom are under 18 years of age, is related to the structural inequalities in the Ethiopian labour market, which limit the job opportunities for adolescent girls and young women. While the Ethiopian economy has grown rapidly, this has not led to an increase of jobs for the growing population, and for young women in particular.

In this paper we present and analyse the migration narratives of a number of adolescent girls who migrated from rural areas and urban towns to Addis Ababa and became commercial sex workers. As mentioned before, migration is predominantly a youthful activity. While there is an increasing body of literature about young people's migration aspirations and experiences, gender is often lacking as an analytical lens.⁹ Most studies focus on boys and young men, and when girls and young women are included, gender is not problematized.¹⁰ We argue that narratives, and in particular life stories, are a very useful method to study the intersection of gender and age. In addition, narratives allow for a life course perspective, showing the moments of agentic power girls can execute in different phases of their lives. These stories show their agency and resilience in a context of structural inequalities, and the changes that take place in their lives and minds over time. This is particularly important in the case of sex workers whose stories are often hidden, resulting in stereotypical portrayals which emphasize their stigmatization and marginalization only.

Inspired by Huijsmans,¹¹ we will analyse the narratives from a relational perspective. This means that we will take the lived experiences of young female sex workers as the point of departure for our analysis of their agency and ways in which they tackle challenges they face. While acknowledging that many adolescent girls migrate under circumstances of structural inequality and experience situations of abuse and exploitation, we argue that this does not mean that they cannot exert agency at all. Only an in-depth analysis of their migration narratives can show when and how migrant girls can exert agency, and when they cannot. In addition, a relational approach means that we will take a number of other relational dimensions into consideration when analysing the narratives of migrant girls. As Huijsmans states, it

includes highlighting age and space as important structuring relations, the role of networks in shaping young people's migrations, the field of the household as a key relational space in which migration dynamics unfold and that itself is reworked through migration, and the connections between early involvement in migration and wider processes of social change and continuity.¹²

The paper is based on a qualitative study about adolescent girls' migration in Ethiopia carried out between 2014–2015, which was part of a larger research project including

Bangladesh and Sudan.¹³ We will discuss our methodology in more detail but first contextualize the migration of adolescent girls to Addis Ababa. We will then analyse agency in three phases in the lives of migrant girls, namely the decision to migrate, arriving and working in Addis Ababa, and their future aspirations. In doing so, we argue that agency is situated relationally and shaped by a multitude of factors, with clear temporal and spatial dimensions.¹⁴

Contextualizing adolescent girls' migration in Ethiopia

The migration of children, including adolescent girls, is not a new phenomenon in Ethiopia: historically, children have migrated for seasonal agricultural labour and to work in other sectors, such as in the weaving sector and as domestic workers.¹⁵ The increased migration aspirations of young Ethiopians, and in particular of rural youth, are strongly related to the economic, political and social changes that have taken place in the country in the past three decades.¹⁶ The government that came to power in 1991, after the downfall of Mengistu, made free movement a constitutional right. This partly explains the growth of labour migration to the Middle East and South Africa, the two major international destinations of Ethiopian migrants. Economically, the government focused first on agricultural development and on public investments in infrastructure. Agriculture is the main economic sector, employing 73% of the population.¹⁷ In particular, the newly developed horticultural sector is offering employment, followed by the service sector and finally the industrial sector, which accounts for only 10% of GDP.¹⁸ Rural poverty has declined, and access to basic services such as education and health has increased. Despite this, around 25 million people live below the poverty line.¹⁹ However, urban poverty rates have increased. The economic situation in Ethiopia, combined with its rapid population growth which reached 2.5% in 2016, has made it harder to tackle unemployment, which is especially high among the increasingly younger population.

In 2014, 45% of the population was under the age of 15 and 71% under the age of 30,²⁰ but the labour market has not expanded to the same extent.²¹ Creating enough jobs to absorb the labour force is one of government's main challenges. Young people face not only the difficulties of obtaining productive employment, but also of securing decent work. The Ethiopian government has made major efforts to improve the educational level of the population. In the past two decades schools and universities have been built all over the country.²² Yet, creating jobs for the large numbers of young and educated is a huge challenge.

Women comprise approximately 52% of the youth labour force. In both rural and urban areas, girls and women are more likely to be unemployed, or employed in the informal economy, often in very low-paid work. Interestingly, while male unemployment increases with higher education, women with higher education are more likely to find employment than their less educated peers.²³ Young women are primarily employed in the horticultural and manufacturing sectors, in wholesale and retail trade and in hotels and restaurants. In addition, women are more likely to be employed in the informal economy, principally in domestic work, but an increasing number of young women have become commercial sex workers as the earnings are higher.²⁴

As mentioned in the introduction, the migration of young women to the Middle East to fill the demand for domestic labour is a development that has caught the attention of

many.²⁵ Initially it was mainly young women who had finished at least some years of secondary education who migrated, but now adolescent girls with no or only basic education are also moving abroad.²⁶ The total number of Ethiopian migrant workers in the Middle East is estimated to be around half a million,²⁷ and more than 60% of them are female.²⁸ International migration is only possible for those who have sufficient resources to arrange their migration, via legal or illegal channels, with the result that the large majority of migrants moves internally.

Addis Ababa has become the most important destination for internal migrants. The city has grown exponentially in the past few decades. In the early 1990s the city was characterized by green pine trees and mud and stone houses with corrugated iron roofs, which gave it a pleasant and calm rural image. Now it is a metropolis housing more than 3 million inhabitants, with many concrete buildings, new roads, traffic jams, and a high pollution rate. According to the Central Statistical Agency, in 2014 there were 1,245,627 rural–urban migrants living in Addis Ababa, the majority female (727,208) and most of them between 20 and 29 years of age.²⁹ The construction sector is booming, creating job opportunities for migrants. Yet, finding affordable housing is still a challenge for many people. Large slum settlements have formed, both inside the city as well as on the outskirts. The new condominiums across Addis Ababa are supposed to offer affordable housing for lower-middle-class families but are also clear signs of the government's neoliberal policies.³⁰ The city has become a crucible of different ethnicities, religions, and socio-economic classes. While this could be considered a positive development, it has also led to increasing social inequalities on many different levels.

Methodology

In view of our interest in questions around the motivations, decisions, experiences and aspirations of migrant girls, we developed a qualitative methodology in close cooperation with the researchers working in Sudan and Bangladesh. In all three research sites the main research methods were a survey questionnaire, life story interviews, and focus group discussions. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork was carried out, including participant observation and informal conversations, which was important to contextualize the lives of the research participants.³¹ We were not seeking a representative group of migrant girls, which is also impossible in view of the lack of statistical data about the number of adolescent girls in Addis Ababa.³² It was more important for us to find girls who were willing and able to share their narratives with us, which would give us insight in their migratory trajectories, their living and working conditions, and their future aspirations. We interviewed domestic workers, sex workers and female returnees who had migrated to the Middle East when they were under 18 years old.

In total 60 survey questionnaires were collected: 30 with migrant girls in Addis Ababa, of whom 15 were between 12 and 17 years old when they were interviewed and 15 between 18 and 24 years old. They were all between 12 and 18 years old when they migrated. Of the 30 women who migrated as adolescent girls to the Middle East, 24 were 18–24 years old at the time of the interviews and 6 of them older than 24. In addition, 20 life stories were collected and recorded. Ten life stories with migrant girls who migrated to Addis Ababa in the past five years and ten with women who migrated to Addis Ababa as adolescent girls but had been living in the city for more than five years. Of the 20 life

stories, ten were from sex workers and ten from domestic workers. Moreover, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, with sex workers and domestic workers in Addis Ababa, and with adolescent girls outside Addis Ababa who had not (yet) migrated. In this paper we only use the data about sex workers. In addition, 20 interviews were carried out with representatives of (non-governmental) organizations involved in migration policies and programmes.

The fieldwork was done by a team of researchers, consisting of four recently graduated Master students and two migrant girls who were sex workers. These two girls introduced the team to other migrant girls, and interviewed a number of them themselves. Involving research assistants that were coming from the research group was part of our feminist and participatory methodology.³³ The two sex workers were affiliated with NIKAT, a self-organization of sex workers in Addis Ababa. It was established in 2006 with the aim to improve the living conditions of sex workers in Ethiopia, and to fight against poverty and HIV/AIDS. NIKAT has a drop-in centre where sex workers can come to relax, rest, meet others and have access to information. The second NGO that facilitated access to migrant girls working as sex workers was Timret Le Hiwot (TLH). The organization was established in 2004 with the aim to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. TLH also has programmes directed at sex workers and their clients. Interviewing adolescent girls requires special attention for ethics. Involving migrant girls as researchers was important to gain trust and confidence from adolescent girls. We always promised confidentiality and anonymity and told the girls that we would change their names in order to protect their privacy. Interestingly sex workers were much more open than domestic workers, which can be attributed to their contacts with a wide range of people, and their subsequently improved communication skills.

The decision to migrate

Getenesh was 25 years old and had been living in Addis Ababa for ten years when we interviewed her in the spring of 2014. She comes from a well-to-do family of farmers in the Amhara Region and vividly told us her life story:

I was 15 when I left Menz. I was a playful child growing up with 15 siblings and the 7th child to my parents. I often preferred to play outside, as my parents were quarrelling most of the time. I was also going to school. All of my siblings were older than me, some of them got married and some moved from the place where we grew up. When you are well off, like my parents, people in the community interfere in your marriage and interrupt a good home. That's what happened to my parents. They separated shortly after we had all left home.

When asked what Getenesh wanted to do when she would grow up she answered:

I was good at running and I loved it. I was in fact selected to go to Bahir Dar for training to become a professional. But my father forced me out of the bus that was going to take me to Bahir Dar. He thought that I wanted to be an athlete because he was incapable of taking care of me. But my teachers chose me out of other students to compete and encouraged me to be a runner. That was my excuse and my means of escape to come to Addis Ababa later on.

Asked about life in the village, she said:

Where I come from, there is the chance of early marriage. A girl can be wed as early as ten years old. I didn't want this at all. I think I'm a little stubborn and don't listen to what I'm

told. I said that I would rather die than marry. I told my dad that he could kill me if he wanted to but that I wasn't going to get married. Whenever people from the community came to ask for my hand in marriage, I would run away to a relative's home and come back a month or two months later. I told my parents that marriage wasn't for me and that I just wanted to be a runner. My other sisters have been wed this way, but I said 'no'.

When she was 15 years old Getenesh migrated to Addis Ababa with the help of a neighbour who had family in the capital.

The major reasons for Getenesh to migrate were the constant requests for marriage and her parents' intention to force her into marriage.³⁴ In addition, she wanted to become a professional runner in Addis Ababa by securing a spot with other athletes. However, her father expected her to get married rather than thinking about such a 'dream'. At an early age her father showed her that he would not allow her to realise her dreams by preventing her from representing her school at an athletic competition. These situations infuriated her. She also had various conversations about going to Addis Ababa with her friends; they all aspired to move to Addis Ababa as it was seen as the best decision one could take after finishing education. There is a strong belief and perception of a better life in the city, which is also shared by many adolescent girls interviewed during the study. The city is seen as a place where one can succeed and prosper; a place where one would be able to share 'modern life',³⁵ reflected in the availability of electricity and transportation, access to money and to better clothing. As Fass³⁶ puts it, adolescents strive to create their own identities in the global world they live in, and migration may be one of the ways in which they hope to achieve these new identities.

Getenesh's story goes against the dominant notion that migration in Ethiopia is mainly inspired by poverty and that most girls are trafficked. She comes from a well-to-do family of farmers, and her parents were not in need of her financial support. In the survey that we carried out as part of this research, only seven out of thirty girls mentioned poverty as the main reason for their migration. In most cases a myriad of reasons inspired the decision to migrate. One of the recurrent themes in the interviews was the restriction on girls' mobility, in particular when they were growing up. Whereas boys are given responsibilities outside the house and have the freedom to go anywhere, restrictions on mobility further affect girls' futures. In the interviews, girls told us that they were not allowed to go to nearby cities to attend to their education once they pass 10th grade, as most secondary schools and higher education institutions are outside the rural villages. In addition, girls' lives were to a large extent determined by their parents' will, and there were clear gender differences with respect to their freedom of movement. In contrast with their male peers, they were not allowed to move around freely. Parents were afraid that they would start premarital relationships or get abducted. The sexuality of adolescent girls is strictly controlled in Ethiopia, and girls' premarital relationships are judged very negatively.³⁷ Getenesh said that she liked to play with boys and girls, but her parents would punish her when she would come home too late:

It's considered bad to have boyfriends. You won't have a good image in the community. It would also mean that you won't be fit to be chosen to marry. It's mostly a brotherly friendship and nothing more. If a family finds out that someone's son touched their daughter, it can escalate to the level of killing people. It's the same if you're found drinking or going out at night.

Stories about unwanted pregnancies are common and used as a warning against premarital relationships. Girls who get pregnant without being married are stigmatized and marginalized in rural communities. In most cases their parents accept the child once it is born, but it is an economic and social burden for them, seen as disgrace brought by their child. The larger society does not accept children born out of wedlock. Abortions are sometimes carried out in order to avoid having the baby. Girls who do have children without being married face difficulties finishing their education and often drop out of school. Most of the interviewed girls said that they did not have boyfriends prior to their migration. Yet, there were also some girls who openly told us about premarital relationships during and after their migration, which had resulted in unplanned pregnancies, and who were working hard to sustain their children.

Eden grew up with an abusive father who passed away when she was 13 years old. Eden was 18 when we interviewed her and had come to Addis Ababa a year and half before. She loved going to school but started smoking and chewing *chat*³⁸ when she was in 7th grade.

I became friends with one of the owners of a chat shop. I shortly became addicted to chat and used to chew with him, skipping classes at school. He showed me how to chew and how to smoke cigarettes. At times, he would also make me smoke weed. He used to say that it would relax my mind, and at the time it did relax me. You get to forget your worries as you relax and laugh. He became my boyfriend. I started to spend more time with him than at school or with my mom. I was only around 14 or 15 years old. He was much older. I would say around 23 or 24. At school, we never talked about sex. The first time it happened to me with him was very scary to me. It happened right after I met him, which looking back was really young for me to have started sex and everything else that I did. I also had two pregnancy incidents as the result of unprotected sex with him; I had to go through an abortion in a nearby health post.

Eden became addicted to *chat* and drugs, and at a certain moment her boyfriend 'became tired of her', because of her addictions. She decided to leave and move to Addis Ababa. Her ex-boyfriend helped her financially: 'Surprisingly, he was the one that actually gave me the money to travel to Addis Ababa.'

While many girls stressed that it was their own decision to go to Addis Ababa, relatives, (boy)friends and neighbours often played a role in encouraging them to migrate and in facilitating their migration. In contrast with the dominant discourse in Ethiopia, which emphasises the role of brokers and traffickers who actively approach and convince girls to migrate, none of the girls in our study mentioned these. This corresponds with research done by Overs³⁹ whose informants mentioned that coercion, trickery or violence to recruit girls and women as sex workers is rare. Feven was one of the few girls who came to Addis Ababa through a (female) broker. She was doing sex work in her place of origin and met a woman who persuaded her to go to Addis Ababa:

She said: 'You are beautiful, you will get a lot of money working in Addis Ababa.' (...) She told me that it is rare to find young girls like me doing business, and she convinced me that being young and beautiful brings a lot of money. When she told me such stories my heart started beating and my desire to migrate increased. I decided overnight. The woman promised to arrange a place for me to stay.

In other cases the role of brokers was limited to finding employment for recently arrived girls. We therefore need to be careful with the use of the term 'broker'. Relatives and friends can facilitate the migration of girls, especially in cases where aunts will take responsibility to bring a girl to the city and get her better education possibilities; yet this does not

mean that they have actively persuaded girls to migrate and benefit financially from their migration and employment in the city. Girls migrate with the help of others, but play an active role in their migration and are not mere victims of brokers and traffickers.⁴⁰ Most of the girls we interviewed had the intention of migrating to the city because of the perceived benefits of city life. Brokers and other people who assisted them were mere facilitators of their migration process.

Entering sex work

Getenesh came to Addis Ababa with high expectations but has not been able to achieve what she wanted. She explained:

Back home we used to think that Addis Ababa was everything and a source of making your dreams a reality. My dream was to make my running a reality, but this has not happened. I left waitressing because I didn't like the work. I then was a domestic worker for two years. (...) Then I took up another waitressing job, where I again worked for two years. I saved money and was able to visit my family. I returned to the same place and worked a little longer there, but the employer and me disagreed often so I left that job. The manager of the place wanted to beat me and so we fought most times. I said that he could fire me if he wanted to but that he could not touch me. I left one day without telling the lady that hired me. She asked me to come back but I refused. I left and got into sex work because one of the friends I made around my area encouraged me.

While the attraction of city life often inspired the migration of adolescent girls, in the interviews their positive impressions were overshadowed by disappointment and negative experiences. Abuse, exploitation and unfulfilled expectations were abundant in the narratives of adolescent migrant girls, but this does not mean that they were not able to exert any agency. The girls kept making decisions while living in the city, whether it was changing work or continuing their migration onward. As the interview excerpt above shows, Getenesh took the decision to leave her first job as a domestic worker, moved to another job and later became a waitress. She also entered sex work out of her own will, just like Eden, who said:

I knew that as soon as I arrived here I would need to make money as I had nowhere to stay and no one to take care of me. In addition, during my time with my ex-boyfriend I used to see many sex workers who were always well dressed, looking beautiful, and they knew a lot of people. I knew if I managed to go to Addis Ababa I would be like them and make a lot of money, but I didn't know how. Even though I didn't know how their daily life was, I knew I wanted their shining life. After I made it to Addis Ababa I was sitting on the curb around Piazza smoking a cigarette when one girl approached me. I think she could tell that I was new. We started talking and she asked me about myself. I told her that I left my hometown to become a sex worker. She didn't know me and although she had just met me, felt really bad for me. She told me that a couple of girls rented a room together nearby. She took me there for the night.

Getenesh's and Eden's stories show us that decisions are inspired by many different factors. They are often made without proper information, especially about life in the city, and the realities that they are facing are different from what they expected. Once in the city, life takes different directions. The migration they chose may offer them 'hope or not',⁴¹ but they keep going, changing or persisting in order to survive. The idea of agency of child migrants has been taken up theoretically by a number of

authors.⁴² In her research with child domestic workers in Tanzania who work long hours and face a range of abuse, Klocker offers the idea of thick and thin agency to understand the continuum of children and young people's constrained agency in different contexts. She argues that, 'thin' agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives. 'Thick' agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options.⁴³ Over time and through space, as well as across different relationships, a person's agency can get 'thicker' or 'thinner'. Moreover, the relational nature of the agency of children and young people is an important element in understanding the interconnectedness of children and young people's ability to act. Agency is 'situated relationally and shaped by factors such as prior migration experiences, household migratory history, relations of age, and young migrants' social position in networks of recruitment'.⁴⁴

At the time of leaving, migrant girls' objectives, plans and motivations for migration were embedded in their childhood social relations and closely interlinked with their status as girls and their position in the household. Yet, over a period of time, the gender and age power relations shifted, as a result of the spatial shift linked to migration and their experiences at destination. This shift intersected with a process of personal growth and development of an adult identity with the capacity to decide about the direction one's life was going to take, even in contrast sometimes with norms.⁴⁵ The narratives of migrant girls demonstrate agency and resilience in coping with situations of abuse, exploitation and violence. In addition, vulnerability, exploitation and abuse are not objectively identifiable conditions but 'notions that are negotiated, experienced and perceived in different ways by differently positioned young migrants'.⁴⁶

Running away from abusive employment situations is one example of girls' ability to act. Hayat came to Addis Ababa when she was 15 years old, invited by her aunt. Her father had passed away and her mother had difficulties making ends meet. She neglected her children, which affected Hayat very much, and she was happy when she had the chance to improve her life. She told us:

As soon as I arrived, I was amazed by the colourfulness of the city. My hopes and dreams of being educated and becoming a better person became brighter with the city lights and I was extremely happy with what was waiting for me. I saw myself finishing school, getting a well-paid job, and helping my mother out of the life that she led.

But her aunt's promises were broken; Hayat had to do household chores instead of going to school, and when her aunt's husband started to rape her; she decided to run away. She said:

I didn't tell my aunt, fearing that I would disrupt a marriage, but also fearing that she wouldn't believe me and it was not worth the risk of telling her. The fact that I kept quiet actually encouraged him to try and rape me again and again until I left. After seven months in that house, I told some girls that I met around the school what happened to me. They said that I should leave, and invited me to stay with them and that seemed like a good alternative to me. I left the house without telling my aunt. At first, I didn't know what kind of work my friends were doing, but I knew they were much better off than me.

Hayat's story depicts the reality of many girls who are domestic workers. Many Ethiopian families have domestic workers, and these are sometimes relatives from rural areas who came to the city with the intention to be educated. Such relations have shifted from

becoming a means of helping the child of a relative to unregulated employment and exploitation.⁴⁷ In the case of Hayat this even led to rape.

In Addis Ababa, entering sex work can be perceived more of a choice for girls, but it is a choice that is made in very constrained circumstances. A large number of girls in our study became sex workers after having worked as domestic workers or waitresses.⁴⁸ They had been disappointed by their lives as domestics, frustrated because their dreams of continuing their education were not fulfilled or harmed by the abuse and exploitation they encountered and the low payments they earned. Sometimes other girls convinced them to run away and to take up other work, first in waitressing and then as sex workers, as they can earn more than with domestic work. This was the case with Getenesh and Hayat. In some cases, brokers play a role in finding new households for domestic workers, and they can be the ones who arrange sex work for girls in hotels, bars or on the street. Street workers are more independent than sex workers who work in hotels and bars, which are controlled by the owners.

Entering and doing sex work seems to allow for more agency than domestic work as sex workers are not depending on employers, pimps or brokers. Yet, in many cases girls who take up sex work are confronted with new threats after having left domestic work. The most important threats come from clients, who force them to have sex without condoms, to have sex in ways they do not approve of, or who refuse to pay them. Feven said:

Many men beat us when the position and way they want (sex in) is difficult for us, and I don't want people to beat me. Most of them want us when they get drunk and they don't care about us. Life consists of ups and downs and people pass through it, but many men don't understand this fact and see us like dolls. When I face such harassment, I can't do anything; it is just my fate to accept the punch. I feel powerless and empty because I put myself there with my own consent.

Many of the interviewed sex workers complained about the fact that they were unable to leave sex work because they had got used to earning much more money than they would get as domestic workers, in waitressing or in other jobs such as hairdressing. Their most common statement was: 'It is easy to enter sex work but very difficult to get out.' They also say that they are used to the life of drinking, chewing *chat*, going out at night for work and sleeping during the day as a normal routine. This shows that entering sex work is often a personal choice, even though there are very limited alternatives in view of the restrained labour market, but also that leaving sex work is considered impossible and therefore not a choice. There are no other jobs available in which they can earn as much as they do with sex work. Reflecting on her life Fire said:

I always worry about my life, thinking about what I did yesterday, what I am doing and what I will be doing tomorrow. I feel more freedom now than before. Even though I am a sex worker I feel freer than before. My life depends on this work, even though I face the worst things in this work. Some people force me not to use condoms saying that they will give me more money. I face psychological problems as a result of what I face during the work. Wherever I go with a client, we are not treated equally. They call me names saying that I am a prostitute.

Fire regrets that she ran away from her parents because she thinks that she could have improved her life in other ways. Yet, it was the only option she saw at that time and therefore maybe less of a choice. Only in hindsight she is able to reflect on her decision to leave her parental home.

The narratives of the girls show that migration is not merely a spatial move from one place to the other, but an ongoing process shaped by networks, experiences, gender, age and other factors. This becomes even more clear when we look at how young women evaluate their migration to Addis Ababa and reflect on their aspirations for the future.

Broken dreams and future aspirations

Getenesh is able to make a living as a sex worker, and even sends money to her parents sometimes; but she is frustrated about her life:

It has gotten to the point that I get really angry when I hear about running athletes in any form on TV or on the radio. I know that if I had continued my education, I would have been able to continue my running also. So, in essence, I lost both dreams. I have not fulfilled the dream of being a runner and the dream of finishing my education.

Getenesh's narrative shows the constant shifts, regrets and contradictory feelings that she has experienced in her life. On the one hand, she feels that she achieved something by running away from early marriage, taking her life in her own hands, and striving for what she aspired to and struggling to make it happen. On the other hand, she is frustrated that she has not been able to achieve what she wanted. Once in the city, her life took a different direction. Her story, and those of many other girls we interviewed, shows how life choices are shaped and reshaped in the process of migration. The decisions made at an early age also have impact on the future aspirations of marriage and having children. Many of the interviewed girls feel that their chances of marriage have diminished as men will not accept them when they know what type of work they have done. Yet, Getenesh remained hopeful: 'I aspire to be married one day, with a man who has a job and is able to take good care of me, and one who is trustworthy.'

Elsa was distrustful of men who wanted to marry her:

Even though some clients ask me for marriage, I am not happy. I don't trust them; they may put me on the street when they find out that I was doing sex work. So, I don't want to get married until I am self-reliant.

The emphasis on economic independence is related to the economic situation in Ethiopia and the pressure on families. The fact that some of the girls were coming from broken families also affected their perspectives on their own future with regard to getting married and establishing a family. Hayat said:

My opinion about marriage is dependent on my ability to take care of children. Having seen what my family went through, I don't want to marry and bring children to this world if I can't provide a better life for them. I have a boyfriend and we've been in a relationship for around six months now. I first had a customer relationship with him which developed into a relationship. Although he is not happy with what I do for a living, he has accepted it at this point since he knows that I do it to survive. I don't plan to marry him, unless I change my work, or he makes more money.

Hayat is not waiting for someone to marry her but takes the decision in her own hand. This is a rather new development in Ethiopia, where women were supposed to wait till men would ask their hand.

Until recently marriage was the most important way to become independent and make a successful transition to adulthood, but nowadays having one's own income seems to be important as well. In the past young men were only able to marry when they had a job and could provide for their wives-to-be, and women only wanted to marry men who could provide for them. Nowadays many young Ethiopian women do not want to be dependent on men anymore, at least not completely. Economic autonomy is increasingly seen as important in case a marriage does not work out. In addition, women who have money have become interesting marriage candidates for men. Women who have worked in the Middle East are for example increasingly seen as attractive marriage partners because of their financial situation. However, many female returnees distrust men who want to marry them as they are afraid that they are only interested in them because of their access to money, similar to sex workers who distrust the men that want to marry them.

Some sex workers were thinking of migrating to the Middle East, but not many. Most of them hoped to improve their lives in Addis Ababa. The stories they had heard about the experiences of migrant women in the Middle East made them reluctant to go abroad. In addition, international migration is expensive and very few sex workers were able to save money. Their earnings disappeared as soon as the money was in their hands, they said. Yet, there were also girls who hoped that they would be able to change their lives in a structural way by migrating abroad. Elsa said, for example:

I want to stop this work. I want to borrow money and go to one of the Arab countries. Whatever abuse I will face I want to go and work there in order to change my life. If I stay in Addis, I will not change my life. Life is very expensive here. I can't afford to pay 2000 Birr for rent.

Most of the interviewed girls evaluated their migration to the city negatively. While they had had high hopes of changing their own lives and sometimes those of their families, they were confronted with enormous challenges, risks and setbacks. They were disappointed that they had not been able to continue their education or get a well-paid and socially acceptable job. Yet, to focus exclusively on the negative experiences would be to deny their capacities and abilities to make sense of these tensions.⁴⁹ In addition, the way in which they dealt with the challenges and readjusted their aspirations are evidence of agency, albeit 'thin' agency.⁵⁰

Conclusion

In this paper we have followed Huijsmans's plea for the use of a relational approach in the study of independent child migration. Huijsmans discusses a number of relational dimensions important in the study of independent child migration such as the role of networks, the household, and the link between early involvement in migration and wider processes of social change and continuity. We have used a relational approach to look at three phases in the migration process of adolescent girls.⁵¹ By focusing on the decision to migrate, living and working conditions in the city, and their future aspirations we have worked against a homogeneous categorization of adolescent migrant girls but instead shown their diversity and the various relational dimensions that play a role in their migration trajectories.

One of these dimensions was the family background of the girls. We have shown that the poverty discourse which dominates the discussion about migration in Ethiopia is insufficient to explain the large number of girls that opt for migration, within the

country and across borders. In addition to the desire to help their families, many girls migrate to escape oppressive gender regimes, such as early marriages and the limited freedom of movement. While this has also been shown by other authors,⁵² the narratives presented here show the agency and resilience of girls and the ways in which gender and age intersect. The motivation and decision to migrate was embedded in the social relations in the place of origin and closely linked with their status as girls and their position in the household. Yet, over a period of time, the gender and age power relations shifted, because of their migration and their experiences in the city. This shift intersected with a process of personal growth and development of an adult identity with the capacity to decide about the direction one's life was going to take, even in contrast sometimes with norms. This shows that there are constant shifts and changes in the decision-making processes and aspirations of adolescent migrant girls.

Another important dimension that we have highlighted is the role of relatives and friends in the decision to migrate. Dominant discourses about adolescent girls' migration in Ethiopia focus predominantly on trafficking and exploitation. Our study shows that the trafficking discourse falls short, especially when it concerns internal migration. Trafficking is far too often conflated with teenage labour migration with the consequence that any form of migration of children under 18 years of age is considered trafficking.⁵³ Because they are considered underage according to international standards, children are not able to give consent and therefore automatically trafficked in case they migrate independently.⁵⁴ Our research shows that girls may migrate with the help of others but this does not mean that they are by definition deceived, and that those that facilitate their migration benefit financially.

In conclusion, we argue that the decisions of adolescent girls to migrate to Addis Ababa is a way of asserting their agency in moving forward with life, yet this agency is taking place in highly constrained circumstances which are strongly related to the gendered ideologies that affect their position in the household, their educational opportunities and their labour market perspectives. Faced with the daily challenges of living and working as young migrant girls in Addis Ababa, they make and remake decisions that determine their life trajectories for good.

Notes

1. UN, *International Migration Stock*.
2. Schewel and Fransen, *Formal Education*, 9.
3. Carter and Rohwerder, *Rapid Fragility*, 21.
4. Schewel and Fransen, *Formal Education*, 12.
5. Van Blerk, "Poverty, Migration and Sex Work"; Ferede and Erulkar, *Adolescent Girls*; Jones et al., *Rethinking Girls*; Atnafu, Oucho, and Zeitlyn, *Poverty, Youth and Rural-Urban Migration*; Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
6. Kuschminder and Siegel, *Migration & Development*.
7. See de Regt, "Ways to Come"; Fernandez, "Cheap and Disposable"; Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant*; Minaye, "Trafficked to the Gulf States"; Jones et al., *Rethinking Girls*.
8. See for example, Erulkar et al., "Migration and Vulnerability"; Jones et al., *Rethinking Girls*;
9. Huijsmans, "Children and Young People," 5–6.
10. Grabska, "Wasting Time."
11. Huijsmans, "Children and Young People."
12. Ibid., 8.

13. The research project *Time to Look at Girls: Adolescent Girls Migration and Development* also included Bangladesh and Sudan. The research was funded by the Swiss Network of International Studies (SNIS) and carried out in collaboration with Terre des Hommes, Girl Effect Ethiopia, Refugee and Migration Studies Unit at the University of Dhaka, and the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, Sudan. See Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
14. Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*, 18.
15. Abebe, "Changing Livelihoods"; Bonga, "A History"; Bjerer, *Migration to Shashemene*; Chuta and Morrow, *Youth Trajectories*.
16. See Schewel, *Moved by Modernity*.
17. Schewel and Fransen, *Formal Education*, 10.
18. Broussard and Tekleselassie, *Youth Unemployment*, 3.
19. The World Bank Group, *Ethiopia Poverty Assessment 2014*.
20. Central Statistical Agency, *Statistical Report*, 13.
21. See Atnafu, Oucho, and Zeitlyn, *Poverty, Youth and Rural-Urban Migration*; Schewel and Fransen, *Formal Education*.
22. See Akalku, "Higher Education"; Schewel and Fransen, *Formal Education*, Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant*.
23. Broussard and Tekleselassie, *Youth Unemployment*, 24.
24. See Di Nunzio, *The Act of Living*; Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
25. de Regt, "Ways to Come"; Fernandez, "Cheap and disposable"; Jones et al., *Rethinking Girls*; Kebede, Hilden, and Middelthon, "Negotiated Silence"; Minaye, "Trafficked to the Gulf States."
26. Jones et al., *Rethinking Girls*; Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*; Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant*.
27. Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant*, 30.
28. Kuschminder and Siegel, *Migration & Development*, 17.
29. CSA, *Statistical Report*, 22.
30. Demissie, "Situated Neoliberalism"; Bonga, "A History."
31. Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*, 34.
32. The methodological approach was designed in close cooperation with the two other principal researchers, studying adolescent girls' migration in Bangladesh and Sudan. See Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
33. *Ibid.*, 32–3.
34. Other studies have also mentioned early (and forced) marriage as an important reason for girls' migration in Ethiopia, see for example Erulkar et al., "Migration and Vulnerability."
35. Schewel, *Formal Education*.
36. Fass, "Children in Global Migrations."
37. See Tadele, *Bleak Prospects*; Kebede, Hilden, and Middelthon, "Negotiated Silence"; Both and Samuel, "Keeping Silent."
38. *Catha Edulis*.
39. Overs, *Sex Workers*, 19.
40. See de Regt, "Ways to Come."
41. Fass, "Children in Global Migrations."
42. Klocker, "An Example of Thin Agency"; Huijsmans, "Child Migration"; Huijsmans and Baker, "Child Trafficking."
43. Klocker, "An Example of Thin Agency," 85.
44. Huijsmans, "Beyond Compartmentalization," 43; see also, Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
45. See Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
46. Huijsmans, "Child Migration," 1317.
47. Black, *Child Domestic Workers*, 3.

48. See also Erulkar and Mekbib, "Invisible and Vulnerable," 254; Van Blerk, "Poverty, Migration and Sex Work," 248.
49. Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*.
50. Klocker, "An Example of Thin Agency."
51. Hoang, "Gender Identity."
52. See Van Blerk, "Poverty, Migration and Sex Work"; Erulkar and Mekbib, "Invisible and Vulnerable"; Erulkar et al., "Migration and Vulnerability"; Grabska, de Regt, and Del Franco, *Adolescent Girls' Migration*; and Grabska, "Wasting Time."
53. See Bastia, "Child Trafficking?"; Huijsmans and Baker, "Child Trafficking".
54. See Bastia, "Child Trafficking?"

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